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Green Henry

PART ONE

Ι

In Praise of my Origin

M Y FATHER BELONGED to the peasantry of an ancient Alemannic village which derived its name from the man who, when the land was divided up, stuck his spear in the ground and built a house there. When, in the passing of the centuries, the race that had given its name to the village died out, a feudal lord adopted the name as his title and built a castle. Nobody knows now where it stood, nor when the last scion of that race died. But the village stands there still, populous and more alive than ever, while the few dozen surnames have remained unchanged and have to do duty for all the ramifications of the original families, on and on through the ages. Around the church, which has always been kept white in spite of its age, lies the little burial ground which has never been enlarged and whose very earth consists literally of the dust of bygone generations; from the surface to a depth of ten feet there cannot be a particle of the soil that has not made its pilgrimage through the human organism, and once helped to do the digging. But I am exaggerating, and forgetting the four deal boards that go into the ground each time and that spring from the equally old race of giants growing on the green hills round about. Furthermore, I am forgetting the coarse, honest linen of the shrouds, which grew in these fields, was spun and bleached here, and belongs to the family just as surely as the deal boards, and does not hinder the earth of our churchyard from being as beautifully cool and black as any. The greenest of grass grows there too, and roses, along with jasmine, flourish luxuriantly together in such divine disorder and exuberance that there is no planting of single little bushes upon a newly made grave, but the grave itself has to be dug in the midst of a forest of flowers, and only the gravedigger knows exactly, in this chaos, where the tract begins that has to be dug anew.

The village numbers scarcely two thousand inhabitants, of whom every few hundred bear the same name, but only twenty or thirty of these at the most are accustomed to call themselves cousins, since their memory seldom goes back as far as a great-grandfather. Risen from the unfathomable abyss of time to the light of day, these humans sun themselves for a season, as best they may, bestir themselves and fight for existence, to sink again, for good or ill, into the darkness when their time is come. When they feel their noses

with their hands, they are convinced that they must possess an unbroken line of ancestry, thirty-two generations back, so instead of trying to find out the natural chain of descent they are far more concerned, for their part, not to let the chain come to an end. Thus it happens that a man can tell you all kinds of legends and curious stories about his district with the greatest exactitude, and yet not know how his grandfather came to marry his grandmother. Every person thinks he himself has all the virtues, or at any rate, those virtues that according to his manner of life are really virtues for him, and as for crimes, the peasant has as good reason as the nobleman to wish those of his fathers to be buried in oblivion, for he too is sometimes only human, in spite of his pride.

These people have a rich and inexhaustible possession in the wide expanse of field and forest which they inhabit. This possession remains very much the same from age to age; even if a girl marries and takes a piece of property off with her now and then, the young men are quick to retaliate and are willing to go as far afield as twenty or thirty miles to get a wife who will bring an adequate piece of property back. In this way they see to it that the temperament and the bodily appearance of the community preserve the necessary diversity, and so show a deeper and more expert understanding of a healthy society than many a rich industrial town or the princely families of Europe.

The division of property, however, varies a little from year to year, and every half-century it is changed almost beyond recognition. The children of yesterday's beggars are the rich men of today in the village, and tomorrow their descendants will be toiling in the middle classes, eventually either to sink back into beggary or to rise to prosperity again.

My father died so young that I had no chance of hearing him speak about his own father, therefore I know next to nothing about him. Only this much is certain, that his immediate family was having its turn of honest poverty. Since I have no reason to suppose that my entirely unknown great-grandfather was a dissolute rascal, I think it probable that his estate was divided among numerous progeny. I have, as a matter of fact, a great number of distant cousins whom I hardly know by sight, who are now, like a swarm of busy ants, working away to regain a good part of the often divided and much ploughed land for themselves. Indeed, a few of them have already become rich, and their children poor again.

At that time Switzerland was no longer the country which had struck young Mr Werther as being so contemptible, and even though the new crop of French ideas had been buried under the monstrous snowfall of billeting papers that the Austrian, Russian and French soldiers had brought there, yet, all the same, Napoleon's Act of Mediation gave the land a mild Indian summer and did

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not prevent my father from leaving the cows he was pasturing, one fine day, and going to the town to learn a good handicraft. From then on he might have been dead as far as his fellow citizens were concerned, for after years of hard but useful apprenticeship the spirit that was in him, taking a bolder flight, led him further still, and he travelled about in distant countries as a skilled stonemason. In the mean time, however, the softly rustling, artificially flowering springtime that followed the Battle of Waterloo diffused its pallid candlelight in all corners of Switzerland, as it had done in every other country. Even in my father's native village, whose inhabitants likewise discovered in the 1790s that they had been living from time immemorial in the midst of a republic, the honourable Dame Restoration was solemnly installed, with all her handbags and cardboard boxes, and she settled in the place as well as she could. Shady forests, hills and valleys, pleasant resorts, clear rivers full of fish, here and in all the neighbourhood round about, which was moreover adorned with a few inhabited castles, attracted a crowd of visitors from the city to stay with the country nobility and amuse themselves hunting, fishing, dancing, singing, and feasting. They were able to move about the more freely since they had wisely left their crinolines and powdered wigs lying on the spot where the Revolution had thrown them and donned the Greek costume of the Empire, though they were a little behindhand about it in these parts. The peasants looked in amazement at the white-veiled goddesses, their distinguished fellow citizens, at their strange hats, and their even more remarkable waists, girdled directly under the arms. The magnificence of the aristocratic regime was displayed at its height in the parsonage. The country clergy of the Reformed faith in Switzerland were no poor, humble wretches like their brethren in the Protestant north. As all the benefices in the land went almost exclusively to the citizens of the prominent towns, they formed part of the ruling system, and the parsons whose brothers wielded the sword and the scales of justice shared the honours with them, and either helped in their own way to rule the country, or gave themselves up to an easy life. Very often they came of a wealthy family, and then the country parsonages would be more like the country seats of great noblemen; also there were many shepherds of souls who were members of the aristocracy, and the peasants had to address them as 'Junker Pfarrer'. The parson of my native village was not one of these, and he was far from being a rich man, yet, since he belonged to an old town family, he united in his own person and in his way of living all the pride of race and wealth, and the gaiety of the well-to-do townsman. He was proud of being called an aristocrat, and with the dignity of his spiritual office he combined a dash of the brusque, military nobleman, for at that time no one was acquainted with

either the name or the nature of the modern religious-tract conservatism. In his house there was a great deal of bustling and happiness; the children of the parish contributed richly from the produce of field and stall, the guests brought in for themselves hares, woodcock, and partridges from the forests, and, as it was not then customary in the country to hunt with beaters, the peasants instead were pressed into service on big fishing parties, always an occasion for a feast, and thus the parsonage was never dull. They ranged the country far and wide, paid visits *en masse*, and received them likewise, put up marquees and danced under them, or stretched them over the clear streams, and the goddesses bathed beneath them; in merry crowds they would invade a cool and lonely mill, or row on the lakes and rivers in crowded boats, the parson always to the fore, with a fowling-piece over his shoulder or a heavy bamboo in his hand.

There were not many intellectual needs in these circles; the parson's secular library, as I have seen for myself, consisted of a few old French pastoral romances, Gessner's *Idylls*, Gellert's *Comedies*, and a well-worn copy of *Münchhausen*. Two or three single volumes of Wieland had apparently been borrowed from the town and not returned. They sang Hölty's songs, and only one or two of the younger members might perhaps carry a copy of Matthisson about with them. Were such things now and then spoken of, it had been for thirty years the custom of the parson to ask: 'Have you read Klopstock's *Messias*?' and if, as was natural, the answer was affirmative, he was prudently silent. For the most part, the guests did not belong to those choicest circles whose members contribute to the stability of the time by means of their own increased intellectual activity and care for a higher culture; they belonged rather to the more easygoing classes who confine themselves to the enjoyment of the fruits of those activities and make merry as long as they can, without bothering their heads any further.

All this splendour, however, already bore within it the germ of its downfall. The parson had a son and a daughter whose tastes differed strongly from those of their associates. While the son, also in holy orders and destined to succeed his father, established all kinds of contacts with the young peasants, would lie in the fields with them the whole day long, or go to the cattle market and prod the heifers with the air of a connoisseur, the daughter as often as possible slipped out of her Greek garments and retired to the kitchen and the garden, to see to it that the restless company had something decent to eat when they returned from their wanderings. This kitchen, indeed, was not the least attraction for the dainty town dwellers, and the large, well-cultivated garden bore witness to a persevering industry and an admirable love of order.

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The son ended by marrying a sturdy, well-to-do peasant girl, moved into her house, and all the six working days of the week tilled her acres and cared for her cattle. In anticipation of his higher calling, he practised as a sower, scattering the divine seed in well-calculated casts, and exterminating evil in the shape of actual weeds. The consternation and anger at all this were great in the parsonage, especially at the thought that this young peasant woman would one day be established there as lady of the house, she who knew neither how to lie in the grass with becoming grace, nor how to roast and serve up a hare as it should be done. So it was generally hoped that the daughter, who had already little by little bloomed beyond her first youth, would either attract to the family mansion a young parson who was true to his class or that, if not, she would long continue to be the mainstay of it herself. However, these hopes, too, were disappointed.

2

Father and Mother

For one day it happened that the whole village was greatly stirred by the arrival of a tall, good-looking man who wore a beautiful green tailcoat of the latest cut, tight-fitting white trousers and highly polished Russian boots with vellow tops. Whenever it looked like rain, he carried a red silk umbrella, and a large gold watch gave him in the eyes of the peasants an extremely distinguished air. This man walked with a dignified bearing about the village streets, enquiring in friendly fashion at low doorways for various gossips and gaffers, and was none other than the much-travelled stonemason. Lee, who had ended his long wanderings honourably. One may well say honourably, when one reflects that he had made his exodus from the village twelve years previously as a fourteen-year-old boy, poor and destitute, that after that he had had to pay his master by long service for the time of apprenticeship, that he had gone on his travels with a miserable knapsack and little money, and had now returned in this wise, as the country people termed it, a real gentleman. For under the lowly roof of his kinsfolk there stood two immense chests, one of which was entirely filled with clothes and fine shirts and linen, and the other with models, designs, and books. There was an atmosphere of fiery enthusiasm about the twenty-six-year-old man; his eyes shone with a sustained glow of inner warmth and inspiration, he always spoke High German, and tried to see the best and most beautiful side of even the most insignificant thing. He had travelled the whole of Germany from south to north, and worked in all the great cities; the period of the War of Liberation coincided with his years of

wandering and he had assimilated the culture and tone of those days insofar as they were comprehensible and accessible to him; above all, he shared the candid and sincere hope of the decent middle classes for a better and fairer time in real life without knowing anything of the intellectual over-refinements and fantastic schemes that were running riot in various quarters of the higher ranks of society.

He was one of just a small number of workers who carried in themselves the first hidden seeds of the self-improvement and enlightenment which grew up twenty years later in the journeyman class. They took a pride in being the best and most valued workmen, and in this way, by dint of industrious thrift, they acquired the means of educating themselves too, and even before their years of travelling were over, they were seen to be men of character and worth. Moreover the stonemason had found an added inspiration in the masterpieces of old German architecture, which awoke the artist in him and seemed now to justify the obscure impulse which had led him away from the green pasture to the formative life of the towns. With iron perseverance he learnt to draw, spending whole nights and holidays tracing all kinds of works and designs, and even when he had learnt to use the chisel to make the most ingenious shapes and decorations and had become an accomplished craftsman, he did not rest, but studied stonecutting and even such sciences as belonged to other branches of the building trade. Everywhere he sought employment in great public buildings where there was much to see and learn, and showed such powers of observation that his employers used him as much indoors at the desk or the draughting table as on the building site. It goes without saying that he did not rest from work there but occupied many a midday hour in making all kinds of drawings and copying all the calculations he could lay his hands on. This of course did not make of him an academic artist with an all-round education, but it did justify him in the bold plan of becoming a competent master builder and architect in his native capital. With this avowed intention, he now appeared in the village, to the great surprise of his kin, and their surprise was greater still when, clad in an elegant frilled shirt and speaking his purest High German, he associated with the French-Greek figures in the parsonage and courted the parson's daughter. The agriculturally minded brother may have been an accessory or at least an encouraging example; the maiden readily gave her heart to the radiant suitor, and the embarrassing situation which threatened to arise out of all this was speedily removed, when the parents of the bride died, one shortly after the other.

So they had a quiet wedding and moved into the town, never once looking back at the departed glory of the parsonage, where the young incumbent

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immediately installed himself with whole wagonloads of scythes, sickles, flails, rakes, hayforks, with immense four-poster beds, spinning wheels and flaxcombs, and with his brisk and bustling wife who, with her smoked bacon and her solid dumplings, soon drove all the muslin garments, fans, and little parasols out of the house and garden. Only a wall full of choice hunting weapons, which the newcomer too knew how to use, attracted a few hunters to the village in the autumn, and distinguished the parsonage in some degree from the house of a peasant.

In the town this young builder began by engaging a few workmen and undertaking all sorts of small jobs. He himself worked from morning till night and proved himself to be so skilful and dependable that, even before the first year was out, his business had expanded and his credit was established. He was so resourceful and had such quick and sound judgement that soon many of the townsfolk began to ask his advice and to employ him when they were in doubt as to altering a place or having it rebuilt. In addition to this, he was always trying to combine beauty with utility, and was glad when his customers just gave him a free hand, and they thus acquired many an ornament, many a well-proportioned window or cornice, without having to pay any more because of their architect's good taste.

His wife, for her part, kept house with genuine zeal, and the household was soon increased by various workmen and domestics. With great vigour and efficiency she saw to the filling and emptying of numbers of immense market baskets, and she was the terror of the market women and the despair of the butchers, who needed all the power of their ancient privileges to slip a splinter of bone into the scales when the meat for Mistress Lee was being weighed. Although Master Lee had practically no personal needs, and although economy stood in the first rank of his many principles, he was at the same time so public-spirited and so generous that money had no value for him unless it was serving some purpose, either his own or another's. He therefore owed it entirely to his wife, who never spent an unnecessary penny and took the greatest pride in seeing that everybody had his exact due and not a jot more or less, that at the end of two or three years there were some savings which, together with the credit that he already enjoyed, provided this enterprising spirit with a richer field of activity. He bought up old houses out of his own funds, tore them down, and in their place built dignified dwellings, introducing into them various improvements some of which he invented himself. These houses he sold, more or less profitably, proceeding immediately to other enterprises, and all his buildings bore the stamp of a continual striving after a richness of form and conception. Even if an architect with technical training was often

unable to name the source of all the ideas, and had to charge a great deal of the work with indefiniteness or want of harmony, he would always own that there were ideas there, and if he was impartial, he applauded the fine zeal of this man, living at a time when architecture was at its poorest and lowest, at any rate in the remoter provinces where the art was practised.

This life of activity made the indefatigable man the central point of a circle of townsmen who all influenced him and one another, and among these there was formed a smaller circle of likeminded and receptive men to whom he imparted his own restless striving after the good and the beautiful. This was about halfway through the 1820s, when a great number of educated men of the ruling classes of Switzerland, themselves taking up the now clarified ideas of the great Revolution, prepared a fruitful and grateful soil for the July days, and carefully fostered the noble qualities of culture and human dignity. Lee and his companions in their station ably supplemented their endeavours in the working middle class which has always drawn its vitality from the rural population. While these distinguished and learned men were discussing the future constitution of the State, and philosophical and legal principles, the active artisans worked among themselves, and among the people, by trying in a purely practical way to establish their lives as well as they could. They formed a number of societies, in many cases the first of their kind, the object of most of them being to furnish some kind of insurance for the good of the members and their families. Community schools were founded, to provide better education for the children of the people, in short, a number of undertakings of this kind, then still new and commendable, gave these worthy people something to do, and the opportunity in doing it to improve themselves, for in their numberless meetings statutes of all kinds had to be planned, deliberated upon, revised and adopted, directors had to be chosen, and from without as well as from within, laws and methods of procedure had to be made clear, and secured.

On the top of all this and affecting everyone, came the Greek War of Independence which here too, as everywhere else, stirred men's minds, telling them that the cause of freedom is common to humanity as a whole. The sympathy of these non-philological folk with Hellenic doings added a fine cosmopolitan dash to their other enthusiasms and took from the clear-minded workers the last traces of Philistinism. Lee was to the fore in everything, reliable, devoted, and everybody's friend, respected, indeed honoured, by all for his upright character and his lofty ideals. He may be accounted the more happy in that he did not fall a prey to vanity; and this was the time when he began afresh to learn and to make up for deficiencies in his education where

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possible. He spurred his friends on to this too, and soon there was not one of them who could not show you a small library of historical and scientific works. Since the very same scanty education had been the lot of nearly all of them in their youth, there now opened up to them, especially in their researches into history, a rich and fertile country wherein they wandered with ever increasing delight. There would be whole rooms full of them on Sunday mornings, arguing, and sharing with one another their ever new discoveries; for instance, how the same causes had always produced the same effects and so on. Even if they were unable to follow Schiller to the lofty heights of his philosophical treatises, they profited all the more from his historical works. and from this standpoint they tackled his poetry too, which they entered into and enjoyed in an altogether practical fashion, without being able to go into the artistic values which that great man set up for himself. They took the greatest pleasure in his characters, and liked them better than anything else of the kind. The unvarying ardour and purity of his thought and language was more appropriate to their simple way of life than to that of many a learned admirer of Schiller in the world today. But being simple and absolutely practical, they could not get complete satisfaction out of dramatic readings in negligee; they wanted to see these great creations vividly presented in bodily form and, since there was no talk of a permanent theatre in the Swiss towns of that period, they made another decision, again inspired by Lee, and acted plays themselves as well as they were able. To tell the truth, they were quicker and more thorough about setting up the stage and its mechanical devices than about learning their parts, and many a one tried to deceive himself about his real job in the theatre by increased activity in driving nails and sawing boards. Yet it cannot be denied that a great deal of the facility of expression and the pleasing deportment that was the hallmark of almost all these friends could be set down as the result of their dramatic efforts. As they grew older, they gave up these activities, but they remained true to their instinct for what was edifying in every direction. If any today should ask how these men managed to find time for all this without neglecting their work and their households, the answer is that in the first place, these were healthy and ingenuous people and no theorists dissipating time and energy over every little act and every bit of work out of the ordinary, because they must be always analysing and splitting hairs to get any satisfaction out of a thing; and secondly that the hours from seven till ten in the evening, daily and systematically made use of, amount to considerably more than the citizen of today would think, spending them as he does behind a glass of wine and a cloud of tobacco smoke. In those days, a man was not indebted to a rabble of innkeepers for his drink, he preferred to

stock his cellar with his own good wine every autumn, and there was not one of these working men, prosperous or poor, who would not have been ashamed if at the end of an evening meeting he had been unable to produce a glass of strong wine for his guests, or had been obliged to have it fetched from an inn. During the day you would never see a man bringing a book or a roll of paper into another man's workshop, or if he did, he did it in swift secrecy, hiding it from the employees, and then they would look like schoolboys, passing the plan for a glorious warlike enterprise around under the table.

But this strenuous life had nevertheless its evil consequences, though of a different kind. In his various tasks, continually exerting himself almost beyond his powers, Lee one day became badly overheated, then carelessly allowed himself to get a chill, thus sowing the seed of a dangerous illness. Instead of sparing himself now and being careful in every way, he could not refrain from carrying on his full activities and taking a hand in everything that was going on. The various labours incidental to his calling demanded his full energies and he did not consider himself justified in relaxing these suddenly. He made his reckonings, speculated, concluded agreements, went long distances into the country making purchases, was now at the very top of the scaffolding, now at the very bottom in the cellars, tore the shovel from the hands of a workman, made a few powerful casts with it, impatiently seized the lever to help move a tremendous mass of stone, heaved a beam onto his own shoulders if it seemed to him that help was too long in coming, and, gasping for breath, carried it to its destination. After that, instead of resting, he would give an animated lecture in some club or other in the evening, or late into the night he would be on the stage, transported, passionately excited, wrestling painfully with the expression of his high ideals, all this far more exhausting to him than his daily work. The end of it was that he died suddenly, a man in the bloom of youth, at an age when another would have been beginning his life's work, in the midst of his plans and his hopes, never seeing the dawn of the new day which he and his friends confidently looked forward to. He left his wife alone with a five-year-old child, and I am that child.

A man always sets a double value on what Fate has deprived him of, and so my mother's long tales used to fill me more and more with longing for the father who died before I knew him. My clearest recollection of him goes back, curiously, a full year before his death, to a single lovely moment when he carried me on his arm, one Sunday evening in the fields, pulled a potato plant out of the earth and showed me the little swelling tubers, already trying to awaken in me the knowledge and love of the Creator. I still see the green coat and the bright metal buttons close to my cheek, and his shining eyes which

attracted my wondering gaze away from the green plant that he was holding aloft. My mother often told me proudly afterwards how greatly she and the serving maid, who was walking with us, profited by his fine discourse. From still earlier days, the memory of his appearance has stayed with me because of the odd surprise of his being in full uniform and equipment when he took leave of us one morning to take part in some manoeuvres which were to last several days. As he was one of the rifle corps, this image of him, too, is associated in my mind with the beloved green colour and the bright shining of metal. But from his last days I have only kept a confused impression of him; his features I can no longer recall.

When I consider how intensely parents love even the most undutiful children and can never banish them from their affections, it seems to me most unnatural when so-called good people desert and cast off their parents because they lead bad or shameful lives, and I glory in the love of a child who refuses to abandon or disown a father who is destitute and despised, and I can comprehend the infinite vet sublime sorrow of a daughter who still succours her criminal mother even on the scaffold. So I do not know whether it can be called aristocratic in me if I feel myself doubly blessed in being descended from honest and honoured parents, and if I blushed with joy when, having grown to man's estate. I exercised my civic rights during a period of unrest. for the first time, and many a man of riper years came up to me in the assembly, shook me by the hand, and said that he had been a friend of my father and was glad to see me there, and when many more came, who had known the man and expressed a hope that I would follow him worthily. I cannot, even though I know the folly of it, refrain from building castles in the air and calculating often how things would have gone with me if my father had lived, how the earth and all its fullness would have been within my reach from my earliest boyhood; each day that excellent man would have led me further, and in me would have enjoyed a second youth. Just as the community life between brothers is to me as unknown as it is enviable, and I cannot conceive how it is that they generally drift apart and seek their friendships outside, so, although I see it every day, the relationship between a father and a grown-up son seems to me newer, more inconceivable, and more blessed, in proportion to the difficulty I have in picturing it to myself and realizing something that I have never experienced.

As it is, growing nearer to manhood and going out to meet my destiny, I can only collect myself and confine myself to thinking calmly in the depths of my soul: How would *he* act now, in your place, or, what would *he* think of your action if he were alive?

Before his sun of life had reached its noonday zenith, he returned to the inscrutable Infinite, leaving in my weak hands the mysterious golden thread of life which had been delivered to him, and all that remains to me is to join that thread honourably to the dark future or, it may be, to break it irrevocably when I myself die. After many years, my mother used to dream at long intervals that my father had suddenly returned from a long journey in far-off lands, bringing joy and good fortune, and each time she would tell me this dream the following morning, sinking into deep meditation and her memories afterwards, while I, trembling with a holy awe, tried to picture to myself the manner in which the beloved man would look at me, and how things would be if he really did appear one day like that.

As my memory of his bodily appearance becomes more clouded, a conception of his inner being has formed itself more and more clearly and distinctly in my mind, and this noble image has become part of the vast Infinite, to which my ultimate thoughts lead me, and under whose protection I believe I make my pilgrimage.

3

Childhood. Elementary Theology. The School Bench

The period immediately following my father's death was a heavy time of mourning and anxiety for his widow. His whole estate was in a condition of full and rapid development, and it required extensive negotiations to settle it satisfactorily. Contracts entered into were broken off in the middle, undertakings had to be stopped, running accounts amounting to large sums had to be met, and payment of the like to be collected from all over the place; stores of building materials had to be sold at a loss, and it was doubtful, in view of the immediate situation of affairs, whether one penny would be left for the unfortunate woman to live on. Lawyers came, set seals and removed them again; the friends of the deceased, and numerous business men, went to and fro, helping and arranging; things were looked through, reckoned up, sorted out, sold by auction. Purchasers and new contractors came, tried to beat down the prices, or to seize more than their due; there was so much confusion and excitement that my mother, who stood by with ever watchful eyes, did not know which way to turn. Gradually the confusion was all cleared up, one business after another was disposed of, all liabilities were discharged and all claims settled, and it now became apparent that the house in which we last lived was the only asset that remained. It was an old, tall building with many rooms, and inhabited from garret to cellar, like a beehive. My father had bought it

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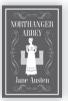
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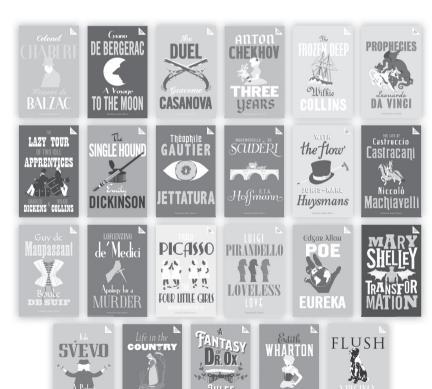
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